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TEACHER AIDE EXPERIENCES AS A SUPPLEMENT TO READING METHODS COURSES.

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THE COORDINATED EFFORTS OF A TEAM OF EDUCATORS FROM THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, INDIANA UNIVERSITY, AND PERSONNEL AT FOUR SCHOOLS IN THE BLOOMINGTON METROPOLITAN SYSTEM TO PROVIDE TEACHER AIDE EXPERIENCES FOR ELEMENTARY EDUCATION MAJORS AS AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TEACHING PROGRAM THROUGH CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS, WORK WITH INDIVIDUAL PUPILS, SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION, AND WHOLE-CLASS INSTRUCTION ARE REPORTED. THE TEACHING STRATEGIES AND PRINCIPLES PRESENTED IN FOUR METHODS COURSES WERE DEMONSTRATED, APPLIED, AND EVALUATED IN ACTUAL ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM SITUATIONS. THE STUDENTS MET WITH THE PROFESSORS THREE TIMES A WEEK AND SPENT 2 FULL MORNINGS IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF THE COOPERATING TEACHERS. AFTER 8 WEEKS, ASSIGNMENTS WERE SHIFTED TO PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH EXPERIENCES AT THE PRIMARY AND INTERMEDIATE LEVELS. THE PROGRAM ALLOWED THE STUDENTS TO SEE THE LIMITATIONS OF THEIR PRESERVICE PREPARATION AND ENRICHED THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF TEACHING STRATEGIES AND THE MATERIALS OF INSTRUCTION. THREE MAJOR DEFECTS OF THE PROGRAM WERE RECOGNIZED -- (1) THE REDUCTION OF STUDENT TIME TO PREPARE FOR COURSE-WORK ASSIGNMENTS, (2) THE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN CLASSROOM PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES PRESENTED IN THE METHODS COURSES, AND (3) SITUATIONS FOR WHICH THE STUDENTS WERE UNPREPARED. STEPS TO CHECK THESE WEAKNESSES ARE BEING CONSIDERED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (BOSTON, APRIL 24-27, 1968). (NS)

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The isolation of the pre-service teacher from the realistic demands of the elementary classroom seemed to one group of educators to impose serious limitations on pre-service teacher education courses. Experimentation on several fronts appeared essential if this gap between teacher preparation and classroom practice was to be lessened.

The concern of these educators with this problem led to a coordinated effort by a team of college personnel in the School of Education of Indiana University and the principals and teachers of four schools in the Bloomington Metropolitan System to provide a series of classroom experiences for elementary education majors. The classroom experiences were integrated with the methods courses for which the college personnel were responsible. In addition, the experiences were planned so as to provide a gradual phasing-in to teaching program through a series of teacher-pupil contacts, starting with tutorial sessions for one or two children and ending with a sequence of several lessons for a classroom of thirty to thirty-five children. These experiences directly preceded the student teaching semester.

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Description of the General Program

Students in the program were enrolled in four methods courses, language arts, science, math, and social studies. The students met with the college professors in classes three times a week and the same professors supervised the experiences in the local elementary classrooms, each professor assigned to one school with ten to twelve college students.

(For lack of a better title, teacher aide experiences was the term used to identify the classroom experiences. It should be evident, however, that the students were not to perform the routine clerical duties frequently associated with teacher aide assistance.)

The involvement of the methods course professors in the planning and supervision of the elementary classroom experiences was essential to the realization of the purposes of the program: Integration of the principles and procedures discussed in methods courses with classroom practices, utilization of classroom situations to illustrate problems and procedures common to each instructional area, provision of limited small-scale teaching experiences in which students could apply teaching principles and use the materials and procedures suggested in the college classroom. A major advantage lay in the opportunity to discuss with students alternative teaching procedures, to analyze student lessons, and to provide consistent feedback on improvement of teaching practices.

It was not the intent of the faculty team who planned the project that the classroom experiences would be closely supervised or tightly structured by the college faculty. They viewed the project as a cooperative effort by the local schools and the university to provide a realistic context for the methods courses. Joint planning sessions of the professors

and classroom teachers at the beginning of each semester and brief consultations at the time of each school visit provided direction and served to clarify purposes and procedures as needed. The degree of supervision of students by university faculty varied but a general rule of thumb of three visits in each eight week session prevailed. The timing and amount of student participation in the classroom was left to the discretion of the classroom teachers. The response of the teachers and principals was very generous; obviously, their interest in the project was vital to its effectiveness.

At the end of eight weeks, the students shifted classrooms, thereby gaining experience at both primary and intermediate levels. The impact of this change was particularly evident in the language arts area. Students struggled at first to accommodate their language and ideas to the different maturity levels but found the experience most revealing of themselves as prospective teachers and of children in terms of growth and development.

The elementary classrooms provided teaching experiences in all four of the methods areas: social studies, math, science, and language arts. The focus of this paper is on the relationship and value of the experiences to the teaching of reading.

KINDS OF CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES

The professors in each of the four methods areas prepared a list of recommended elementary classroom experiences. At the suggestion of the classroom teachers, the professors indicated three or four activities in each methods area that would be generally required of all of the students. Final decision for choice of activities rested with the classroom teacher,

however, and variation in kinds of activities within and among classrooms was strongly supported.

Selection of the recommended activities was based on the value of the experience for integration with the methods courses, realization of the limitations imposed by the inexperience of the students, and the restrictions which had to be placed on the amount of outside planning to be required of students. In view of the fact that the students were spending two full mornings each week in the elementary classrooms, it was agreed that little, if any, additional study time should be spent on lesson planning. The classroom teachers agreed that portions of the two mornings spent in the classrooms could be set aside for student planning sessions.

Forms were provided on which students reported the amount of time spent working in each methods area, kinds of activities, and size of groups with which they worked. Space was provided on this required weekly report for describing difficulties or raising questions; professors either wrote brief answers or arranged to discuss the problem with the student. Feedback obtained from these reports gave valuable clues to the needs of the students, and the levels of insight into the teaching-learning process.

PHASE 1 - OBSERVATION

The first week was set aside for observation in the classroom. Students were urged to acquaint themselves with the basal materials, to observe the levels of reading competencies within and among the reading groups, to note what provisions the teachers made for individual differences, to check the availability and composition of supplementary materials including classroom and school libraries.

The impact of these two half-days of observation was immediately reflected in student concern over the range of reading ability within one grade level and the implications of this range in terms of their preparation for teaching children to read. The necessity of having a wide range of supplementary materials available for classroom use was brought forcibly home to them also. Like many a beginning teacher, they were little aware of the special needs of the above average reader but very sensitive to the plight of the low achiever.

PHASE 2 - WORKING WITH INDIVIDUALS

Attention to individual pupils marked the second stage of the phasing-in to teaching process. Teachers had been specifically requested to limit the amount of individual help offered by students to problem readers, tempting as this alternative appeared to busy teachers. Instead, contact with individual children at all levels of learning competencies was set as a goal.

Students coached pupils preparing oral reading presentations for an audience of classmates, reviewed lessons with children who had been absent, assisted children in the evaluation and correction of completed assignments, supervised special skill drill sessions with one or two pupils, and guided the better readers in supplementary enrichment activities. At this level of participation the teachers continued to do most of the planning. The students then implemented these plans, occasionally supplementing them if it were needed and they were equal to the task.

PHASE 3 - SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION

In the third phase, the focus was on small group instruction. Students and teachers planned activities for groups of children, the size of the groups varying from three to ten. Preparation of a dramatic skit based

on a previous reading lesson, practice sessions on word-attack skills, committee assignments, instruction in the use of the library facilities, and of reference tools; the opportunities were limitless. Techniques for establishing special groupings and the handling of inter and intra group relationships became issues of critical significance in the methods courses.

The first of the required activities in the language arts area slipped into place here. Students were to select a story to read or tell to a group of children, using an introduction which related the story to experiences of the children and to provide a simple follow-up activity. Because of its high interest appeal for children, this proved to be a very satisfactory initial experience in handling a group.

In a second required activity, students presented the new vocabulary words for one reading group. Most of the students followed the procedures set by the teacher or basal reader guidebook, a few ventured forth with ideas gathered from outside readings. Students then devised a simple scheme for checking pupil retention of the vocabulary and planned for reviewing and re-teaching the words to those children who needed this additional work. Student comments on the differences among pupils in the amount of retention provided opportunity to analyze the teaching-learning process, identify probable causes for lack of learning or retention of learning, and suggest techniques for helping children who needed additional reinforcement.

A third required group activity was the planning and presentation of a guided oral reading lesson. This particular activity was selected to provide opportunity for discussion and use of the many alternatives to the "round-robin" practice common to elementary classrooms. Students found

activity a more difficult one to handle in that it required precise timing in order to mesh with the classroom teacher's on-going program, and the planning and pacing of the lesson were key factors in its success. Under optional activities the suggestion had been made that the student be given opportunity to work with each reading group. Students were doing this in almost every classroom and this gave them several opportunities to teach guided oral reading lessons in a variety of ways.

The optional activities included activities in all of the language arts areas. Students worked with individual children who needed help in writing and spelling. They assisted small groups with the preparation of bulletin boards or interest corner displays. In general, students were involved in a wide range of learning activities.

PHASE 4 - TOTAL CLASS INSTRUCTION

Presentation of a book talk in which the student introduced several books by the same author or books grouped around one theme was the only required reading activity in which the student worked with a total classroom group. Under optional activities, selecting and sharing of poetry was suggested. In a second optional activity, students corrected a language arts assignment and analyzed pupil responses to determine which children needed additional teaching and practice. Students analyzed the work of the total group in this activity but actually worked with individuals or groups in the re-teaching session.

Classroom teachers and college professors were agreed that those students who showed evidence of sufficient confidence and teaching ability to handle a large group should be given several opportunities to do so. For some of the students, however, it seemed best to defer experience at

this level and depth until they were doing their student teaching and would be full participants in a total classroom program.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE PROGRAM

Placed in teaching situations in which the complexities of the classroom had to be faced head-on, students began to apply, evaluate, and question teaching principles and practices. Comments on the teacher aide reports were frankly revealing of what students saw as limitations in their pre-service preparation. In addition, the relatively free, non-evaluative conditions under which students were working in the classrooms made it comparatively easy for them to admit to failure and to examine unsuccessful lessons with objectivity. It was not uncommon for students, in analyzing a particular lesson which they had planned and taught, to pinpoint the specific point at which their own lack of understanding of what to teach or how to teach had undermined their effectiveness as teachers. The value of these insights into their own deficiencies lies in its timing: students were becoming sensitive to what it was that they needed to know at the very time when they were enrolled in courses designed to assist them in learning these things.

Students brought teacher-constructed materials and ideas to class; they returned to classrooms with alternative strategies and materials. The cross-fertilization of elementary and college classrooms and the sharing of mutual concerns by prospective teachers, in-service teachers, and education professors gave evidence of being stimulating and productive for all who were involved.

Asked to identify the major contribution of the experiences in the elementary classrooms to their professional preparation, many of the stu-

dents were agreed that the personal involvement with children and teachers had revived their initial commitment to teaching and gave this particular semester of professional preparation a zest and vitality which they found exciting. This itself seemed sufficient justification to continue the experimental semester.

Candid appraisal of the program by the faculty involved in the project and other interested professional persons brought three major criticisms to the fore: (1) the two mornings per week spent in the elementary classrooms lessened the time available to the student for study and preparation of course work assignments, (2) procedures seen in the classroom did not necessarily reflect the procedures recommended in the college methods courses, and (3) students were sometimes involved in teaching situations for which they were not prepared; for example, working with disabled readers when they were not competent to handle learning problems of this complexity.

These are valid criticisms. They cannot be disproved. What remains to be seen is the extent to which the stated criticisms can be ameliorated and whether the advantages of the total program outweigh these disadvantages. In the interests, however, of lessening all three disadvantages, the following steps are now under consideration:

(1) The amount of time spent in the elementary classroom when considered as a deletion of time available for study can best be justified by the extent to which it re-inforces the methods courses. A more precise integration of required classroom activities with methods course assignments would be one means of increasing the re-inforcement value. Careful consideration has to be given also as to the amount of classroom experience

from which maximum learning value can be realized, and a distinction among students according to their need for either more or less of these experiences needs to be made.

(2) The discrepancy between classroom practices and the procedures recommended in teacher preparation courses has been documented as a nationwide failing. The potential impact of the teacher aide program on this problem lies in the establishment of a strong working bond between the methods professors and the classroom teachers, a bond which holds promise for utilizing the strengths of both the improvement of pre-service teacher education. Such an alliance could well serve to improve also the teaching practices of both the professor and the teacher. The strength of the support received from the participating schools and the generosity with which classroom teachers in the project gave of time and effort is concrete evidence of their willingness to be involved in the improvement of the preparation of new teachers.

What is needed here is workshop time in which professors and teachers can plan together their contributions to the pre-service program, can bring into the open and attempt to resolve any differences in viewpoints, can learn from each other. A pre-school workshop of five to ten days buttressed by several Saturday sessions would set the stage for increased collaboration.

(3) The desire of the classroom teacher to use some portion of the teacher aide's time in special assistance for the disabled reader is understandable. The problem was not one of justifying the participation of the student in this teaching situation but in the need for careful planning and direction of the student by the elementary teacher.

In one school, advanced graduate students majoring in the teaching of reading were asked to assist with the program. They instructed ten teacher aides in the use of a simplified diagnostic instrument, assisted each student in the evaluation and interpretation of the test results, demonstrated the use of materials directed toward the improvement of specific skills, and assisted with the supervision of the remedial sessions. The graduate students worked with ten teacher aides. Whether this is an effective supplement to the undergraduate program remains to be seen, as well as the feasibility of doing it with 70-90 students. It appeared to be of value to the graduate students in that it fitted in very well with the practicum requirements for advanced students preparing for supervisory positions.

The acid test for this program lies in the teaching performance of these students once they are in their own classrooms. The need for valid and recognized means of evaluating teaching competencies remains critical. Evaluation is essential, however, if effective revisions in the program are to be made.

Summary

The integration of the methods courses with teacher aide experiences in local elementary classrooms is one part of Indiana University's experimental project, TEAM, Teacher Education through Applied Methods. A series of planned experiences leads the student into teaching situations of gradually increasing complexity and depth. The activities in the elementary classroom are integrated with the teaching principles and procedures presented in the methods courses which are taught concurrently. The increased sensitivity of the students to teaching and learning problems appeared to have strong potential for improving the effectiveness of their preparation as teachers of reading.